

THE VISION SPLENDID

The substance of the following narrative was recently communicated to me, with permission to restate and publish it in my own words.

There stands in a northern dale a little lonely church, ringed about by towering moorland fells. It is also nearly encircled by the clear, swift river which gives the dale its name, for at this point the stream becomes obstructed and, making a sudden bend upon itself, leaves a tongue of land, projecting into the loop, occupied only by the sacred building, the surrounding graveyard of which reaches to the water's edge, which forms a natural, unofficial boundary to the rows of mounded tombs. The small pre-Reformation building is of no architectural moment or beauty. Owing to its seclusion it forms no landmark; it owns neither spire nor tower; age and weather have subdued its colour into harmony with the natural surroundings; and, standing as it does at the feet of the enclosing hills, it is unobservable until one reaches it. A tiny square belfry, holding a single bell, whose shrill clang from within the latticed windows is nearly drowned by the roar of some adjacent falls of the river, alone surmounts its low ancient walls and nearly level roof. The nearest village is a mile away; a few cottages upon the road leading to it are sufficiently distant and inconspicuous to preserve the sense of its entire seclusion, whilst its sole approach is a shady lane terminating at the churchyard gate, unless one cares to reach it from the meadows by a long series of stepping-stones when the river runs low. Yet since Saxon times, either in the present or some still more venerable building upon the same site, the folk of this sparsely peopled country have offered worship here,

and the ancient peace of this rural sanctuary has been disturbed by nothing more than the passage of wayfarers along the quiet dale. Here beneath the open sky, amid the moorland breezes, the stillness of the hills, and the splash and swirl of the encircling stream, the faith, hope, and charity of generations have found expression, the great rites of the Christian faith have been simply and modestly performed, and God has tabernacled with men. Especial sanctity—something that by natures of a certain sensitiveness can be palpably felt, and that is not due merely to fancy or idealising—attaches to such a place. The spiritual energies continually generated there cleave to it and become intensified from year to year, undisputed and unadulterated by impure cross-currents inevitably incident to crowded centres given over to secular pursuits.

Thither, too, it once fell to me, a stranger to the place and its people, to come—to be guided, it were perhaps better to say—during a brief summer vacation, and after a long period of strain in respect to both inward and outward things, to enjoy a welcome respite that enabled a long-repressed and stricken spirit to recover itself as a smitten plant regains its former erectness after storm. I am not habitually a churchgoer, but the first Sunday of my visit found me at this church and joining in its simple service which was rendered to a chaste ritual and with a dignity and feeling often lacking in more imposing places. The human material available for its conduct was indeed humble in a worldly sense, but the fact helped to make the service the more impressive. A villager I had seen stone-breaking on the road, the previous day, rang us into church by a wheezy bell-rope within the porch, and afterwards officiated in a variety of capacities. Another white-haired rustic—keeper, as I knew, of the most primitive of post-offices, the sole small window of which displayed a medley of clay pipes, sweet-bottles, and the withered holly-leaves of last year's Christmas decorations—sat at a small organ, blown by a farmhand who yesterday was driving grouse upon the moor,

which after some ineffectual preliminary efforts at last coughed out a modest voluntary. In the choir sat a handful of young girls—gay in cheap summer finery—presently to be reinforced by a surpliced procession of three small boys and two elder youths, to whom it was committed to lead the singing of the august canticles of the Church militant here on earth. The sole ministrant—the rector of the place, a little middle-aged man wearing spectacles of thick glass to assist his extreme short-sightedness—proved to be the most impressive reader of the liturgy and lessons it has been my fortune to hear. He conducted matins, preached a simple sermon rich in feeling and insight, and then went on to celebrate the communion-office as one apparently oblivious of all earthly presences and surroundings and consumed only by zeal of the Lord's house. His defective outward sight seemed to be the counterpart of intensified inward vision, whilst the wonderful flexibility and moving modulations of his rich voice brought out unsuspected significance from familiar words—a voice which was the index and instrument of a good and earnest spirit that enforced the attention and concurrence of those associated with him in worship.

Perhaps it was largely his personality that drew me there again a week later. It was one of those gorgeous halcyon mornings of summer, of utter stillness and clearness,—a veritable *Sun-day*—when the unobstructed solar vibrancy beating through the night-cooled air awakens all nature to larger vitality and unites all its parts into a common life, and when even the uncreated light seems to be palpable and visibly to permeate created things. Almost reluctantly I entered the little church; it seemed so good to stay outside, to prefer the unvoiced universal adoration proceeding there to the formalised worship—impressive though it was—within those old stone walls. Yet even these excluded but little of the flooding sunshine, and through the open porch-door one could catch, as an accompaniment to the formal liturgy, the song of birds, the insects' myriad hum, and the sound of many waters from the

river rippling around the graveyard. The same little assembly of worshippers had gathered there as upon my previous visit; the same choir and priest; the shrill bell ceased to clang and the simple morning service was renewed.

In the course of it something happened. Before relating it I had better say that I had come labouring under no emotional excitement or undue mental elation, and was perfectly placid. Ten days of liberty from every care, and of refreshment in bracing air and enchanting scenery, had wrought great healing of mind and body. And I am no visionary, never having had the least previous experience or faculty of a clairvoyant kind, or even the desire for it. I had come merely because it was good to be there, good to satisfy the impulse to worship in that solitary sanctuary and in such surroundings. I wished also to hear again that good man's voice and to feel the spell his earnest spirituality all unconsciously cast.

The singing of the *Te Deum* had begun. I was following, with special attention, its majestic opening phrases, in which the poor worship of those on earth is boldly brought into direct association with the adoration offered in the heights. My thought began to contrast the modest praises uttered in this humble place in the outward world, by its crippled organ, the puny voices of this juvenile choir and handful of villagers, with the stupendous unimaginable pæans that must needs be heard above when "all angels cry aloud, the heavens, and all the powers therein." Whilst thus reflecting I caught sight, in the aisle at my side, of what resembled bluish smoke issuing from the chinks of the stone floor, as though from fire smouldering beneath. Looking more intently I saw it was not smoke, but something finer, more tenuous—a soft, impalpable, self-luminous haze of violet colour, unlike any physical vapour, and for which there was nothing to suggest a cause. Thinking I experienced some momentary optical defect or illusion, I turned my gaze farther along the aisle, but there too the same delicate haze was

present; so also wherever else I looked. At first it was apparent only at a little height above the ground; soon it burst forth upon all sides and flooded the building to the roof, manifesting itself rapidly, yet so gently as to permit me to adjust myself gradually to it without feeling alarm. Then as I peered into this indefinable haze that now bathed the church with a suffusion of lovely colour I perceived the wonderful fact that it extended farther than the walls and roof of the building and was not confined by them. Through these I now could look and could see the landscape beyond; they constituted no obstacle to my vision; they were there, but had become translucent. I saw that it spread into the graveyard without; it was over the winding river, over the grass of the fields; it rolled in billows up the sides of the hills beyond. At a single visual act, and without need of glancing from one point to another or from this object to that, the building I stood within and the whole surrounding landscape were in view, and all was garnished with this ultra-natural light. What was locally behind me was equally perceptible with what was before me; what was above my head and about my feet was seen equally well at the same moment. I saw from all parts of my being simultaneously, not from my eyes only. I suppose it was my soul that saw, and the soul is not bound by our conditions of space or the laws of bodily vision. Yet for all this intensified perceptive power there was as yet no loss or touch with my physical surroundings, no suspension of my faculties of sense. A momentary doubt as to whether I was experiencing faintness or passing out of the body was solved by a grasp at the pew-back before me and by nudging, as if inadvertently, the arm of the person at my side. Thus satisfied of my physical bearings I gave myself up, with a pleasurable curiosity, to await developments. I felt happiness and peace—beyond words.

Upon the instant the luminous blue haze engulfing me and all around me became transformed into golden glory, into light untellable. It may have been heaven in its infiniteness that opened before me; I knew not.

Even now at the distance of some years, and after constant reflection upon that unforgettable sight, I cannot formulate my perceptions or tell, save in some sort of imperfect sequence, anything of what was the subject of vivid instantaneous cognition. The golden light, of which the violet haze seemed now to have been as the veil or outer fringe, welled forth from a central immense globe of brilliancy in the zenith above me, a globe of flame larger and brighter by many times than our sun, yet the light of which had not our sun's fierceness, but was so mild, so little dazzling, that I could just bear to look into it with unflinching eyes. A corona, or photosphere, that had the heavens for its expanse, surrounded it, whilst rays from the central furnace beat forth in great pulsing billows of light that filled all space and, penetrating to the depths of our earth, vitalised every atom and every creature upon or within it.

But the most wondrous thing was that these shafts and waves of light, that vast expanse of photosphere, and even the great central globe itself, were crowded to solidarity with the forms of living creatures, with multitudinous millions of the heavenly host, in a flux of continuous, rhythmic, joyous motion. I know that I cannot make myself understood, but I affirm that there was no part or point of space that they did not fill; that there were no special intervals between them; each form was whole and distinct in itself, yet they interpenetrated one another, passed through and in and out of one another without disorder and without disturbing the rhythm of their universal movement as the great heart-beats of pulsing light throbbed through them. There was no "scenery," no landscape, nothing that can be called *place*. "I saw no temple there for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple." All was solid creatural life, an ocean of life of which the waters, to their depths, consisted of spiritual beings; a single coherent organism filling all space and place, yet composed of an infinitude of individuated existences as our own bodies are an organised congeries of separable

cells. The perception has made intelligible to me a strange paradox of Swedenborg's: "the more angels, the more room"; that is to say, for angels there is no space after the manner of mortal ideas, but every angel *is* space in himself, is penetrable by and affords spacial accommodation to every other angel, so that the greater their number the wider their liberty of action and experience, the larger their opportunity of knowledge and of joy, since the interpenetration enables each to share the knowledge and the joy of every other. Newman, too, must have glimpsed the same truth, and I must borrow some lines from his *Dream of Gerontius* to help out my own inability of expression:—

Whereas on earth
Temples and palaces are formed of parts
Costly and rare, but all material,
So in the world of spirits naught is found
But what is immaterial; and thus
The smallest portion of this edifice—
Cornice or frieze, or balustrade or stair,
The very pavement,—is made up of life,
Of holy, blessed and immortal beings
Who hymn their Maker's praise continually.

I saw, moreover, that these beings were present in teeming myriads in the church I stood in; that they were intermingled with and were passing unobstructedly through both myself and all my fellow-worshippers. I reflected upon the astonishing ability that had come to me to behold incarnate and spiritual beings equally well at the same moment, to be conscious in two worlds simultaneously. The heavenly hosts drifted through the human congregation as wind passes through a grove of trees; beings of radiant beauty, and clothed in shimmering raiment the indescribable gorgeousness and iridescence of which flashed and sparkled as they moved along within the light-beams that streamed forth at the Divine pulsations. Those that came nearest me I was able to scrutinise, though the joy-dance was too swift, the procession too vast and numerous, to allow of more than a momentary glance at individuals. Those

farther away, or high above me, showed but as motes in the eternal light, whilst those farthest of all, who circled within the very heart of the central pulsing globe, appeared only as the just perceptible motion of flames seen within a huge furnace. From the Deity to man stretched an ocean of being interfused with and vivified by a common Life, and I realised that the *Te Deum* offered here in the words of earth was also being sung by the angelic choirs in the terms of heaven.

But this vast spectacle of mingled heaven and earth was succeeded by an even richer experience; one in which everything of time and place and form vanished from my consciousness and only the ineffable eternal things remained. No word was spoken, but what ensued was as though a voice had said "Friend, come up higher!" And as the point of a candle-flame leaps suddenly upward when an object is held just above it, so the flame of my consciousness leapt to its utmost limit and passed into the region of the formless and uncreated, to tell of which all words fail. You remember the story of what befell Absalom. He "rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the branches of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth, and the mule that was under him went away." That is the best description I can give of what happened to me. The name Absalom surely signifies a blissful condition of the soul rather than a person. Reference to a biblical lexicon tells me that it implies the combined ideas expressed by the two words *Abba* (father) and *Salem* (peace). It means the peace of the Father that passes understanding; the peace of Jerusalem, for which the Psalmist urges us to pray. And whosoever is granted the grace of this peace is as Absalom. "His head catches hold of the oak"; his intelligence, that is, is caught up and passes into union with the strong Tree of Life planted in the midst of the garden of our creation, whose branches are spread continually over all. Thus was I also "taken up between heaven and

earth" and remained poised in that spaceless region in which one is unified with all that is and in which are seen and heard things which it is not lawful, and not possible, to utter. For a few moments of mortal time, which are no measure of the intensity of the spirit's experience in the world immortal, all consciousness of my physical surroundings was withdrawn; my merely rational faculties became suspended; "the mule that was under me"—the sensibilities of the merely animal and spiritually sterile part of me—"went away"; passed into utter nescience. . . .

Eventually, whilst thus rapt, the remembrance of the outer world from which my consciousness had been transported returned to me, like an old half-forgotten memory. What had now become, I found myself asking, of the outer world to which I belonged; of the church and the company of worshippers I had left? By some swift operation of the spirit the answer came coincidentally with the enquiry; and it came not in words, it was shown to me. Long afterwards I came upon a parallel incident in the revelations of Julian, the anchoress of Norwich, who tells how, in her ecstasy, the Lord showed her "a little thing, the size of a hazelnut in the palm of His hand," and told her it was "all that is made"; that in the Omnipotent hand the created universe was as nothing more than that. In like manner the insignificance of temporal things in comparison with the eternal was made known to me. This world and my recent surroundings were exhibited to me, but at a most remote distance, as when one looks out upon a scene through a reversed telescope. Then, as I looked at them, they were removed still farther and farther away until they showed no larger than a sail upon the horizon appears to an observer from the shore. Finally, as gradually and gently, they were brought back towards me. And with their bringing back the experience ended. Without shock or violence the consciousness which had been so highly exalted relapsed and shrank to its normal limits and became readjusted to physical conditions; the spirit was returned

to its fleshly sheath as a jewel is replaced in its casket after use and locked away. Once more I was standing in the church, perfectly well and unmoved. I feared lest some physical collapse had occurred and created a scene. Happily no external sign of this terrific visitation had occurred; no one was aware that anything had happened. Only a few moments could have been occupied by an experience in the spirit of which the incidents were so vivid and the details so numerous that my memory still fails to exhaust them. The singing of the *Te Deum* had not concluded. The words that first fell upon my reawakened ears were those of the moving cry raised for all here exiled in the flesh. "O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thy heritage. Govern them and lift them up for ever. Make them to be numbered with Thy saints in glory everlasting." Had those around me who sang those words been lifted up with me, they too would have known that, although a veil was before their face, they were already numbered with the saints in the Eternal Eye; they would have seen that the everlasting glory was about them at that moment and continually.

Upon leaving the little sanctuary my way took me along a lonely road. There, in the hedgerow, overhung by full-leaved trees and from a rich profusion of wild undergrowth, a stream of crystal water, grateful to man and beast that had to traverse the long ascent beyond, spouted from an unfailing spring in the hill-side rock into a large granite trough resting upon the ground. The trough had been placed there evidently by some mystical lover of the things of God, who considered the poor and needy among even His brute creatures, for upon the front of it was graven in bold letters a line from one of the Psalms: *De torrente in via bibet; propterea exaltabit caput.* The words came to me with a special and personal significance after what had just occurred; they contained the promise of that which I had been receiving in such rich fulfilment. I had drunk of the eternal torrent upon my way, and, whatsoever steep lay before me, thenceforth, in

remembrance of the living water, I could lift up my head.

Such is the imperfect narrative of something that occurred some years ago. I have never before written it; seldom spoken of it; so few there are who understand. Publish it if you will—*ad majorem Dei gloriam*, and for the encouragement of others. But let it be without a name.